



## **Memorandum**

**To:** Mayor Thomas J. Tomzak and Members of City Council  
**From:** George C. Solley, Councilor, Ward 2  
**Date:** July 12, 2011  
**Subject:** **Appointment of Working Group to Develop and Assess Strategies to Avoid Demolition of Historic Structures**

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### **ISSUE:**

Fredericksburg continues to see the demolition of historically significant structures within the City. Most often, this is the culmination of a long process of neglect, resulting in an official determination that a structure is unsafe. At that point, under Virginia law, the fate of that structure lies with the property owner, who has three legal options: repair the structure, board up the structure, or demolish the structure. If the property owner decides to demolish the structure – even one of historic significance – the City must acquiesce.

Most of the attention on demolition of historic structures in the press and among private citizens has centered on this last phase of the process – from declaration as an unsafe structure to demolition. Yet the process leading to demolition starts much earlier, when a structure first begins to deteriorate. From that time, there is almost always a continuum of decline, a long period of decline and/or neglect before a structure reaches a state that causes an official determination.

Discussions with city officials, historic preservationists, and others in the community, as well as a review of practices in other locations, indicate that there are likely a number of points along a structure's continuum of decline where action could be taken that would halt or even reverse the downward trend. In order to identify the specific actions, it is desirable that a small group of knowledgeable members take a close look at the continuum of decline and at potential for action at various key points along that continuum: existing capabilities of the city and other organizations; applicable federal, state, and city regulations; city procedures; and the potential for partnerships.

### **PROPOSAL:**

That Council direct the City Manager to establish a high-level working group to consist, at a minimum, of members of City staff and representatives of the historic community. The purpose of the working group would be to develop and assess strategies to avoid demolition of historic structures within the City and

to provide recommendations to City Council no later than October 11, 2011. These recommendations should include the following: steps to effect identification of "at risk" properties, use of spot blight abatement for historic properties, possible requests for changes to State law, tax incentives for rehabilitation, changes in City procedures, and any other strategies to be determined by the working group.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** No direct fiscal impact. The request will take staff time for development and support.